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SUBJECT: THE SIKHS OF AFGHANISTAN - A VANISHING COMMUNITY

¶1. (U) SUMMARY: Upper House MP Awtar Singh Khalsa, the only Sikh or Hindu member of the Afghan parliament, said the Sikh and Hindu community had dwindled from approximately 50,000 families before the jihad against the Soviets, to approximately 6,000 people at present. He attributed the population decline mostly to migration. Many of the remaining Sikhs and Hindus would leave the country if they could afford to do so. The Sikhs and Hindus, he added, face many problems, from poverty to discrimination and lack of representation in the government.

Dwindling Population

¶2. (U) Senator Awtar Singh Khalsa is the recognized leader of the Sikh community in Kabul. (Though of separate faiths, the Sikhs and Hindus are treated as one community by the Afghan people, and by GIROA.) Before the war with the Soviets, there were 50,000 Sikh and Hindu families living in Afghanistan. Now there are about 6,000 people in the provinces of Nangarhar, Khost, Ghazni, Helmand and Kandahar. He attributed the decreased numbers mainly to emigration. Many families fled during the war with the Soviets, and either stayed abroad or returned to find their homes and shops were looted or destroyed, and their land often seized.

¶3. (U) Under the Taliban, Khalsa said, Hindus were forced to display orange or yellow badges on their clothes and temples (Sikhs were easily identifiable by their headaddresses). The Taliban had also forbidden Sikhs and Hindus privileges allowed to other Afghans, such as the right to carry weapons, ride horses, or return to the country once they left. He recalled being summoned to the Taliban's Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice headquarters, where Hindus had been brought in to the station and told they must convert to Islam or leave the country. Khalsa said the Sikhs and Hindus refused to convert, but found a sympathetic ear at the Taliban's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which was able to help them resolve the issue.

Multitude of Problems

¶4. (U) The Hindus and Sikhs still face a number of problems. They are often barred by other Afghans from practicing their funereal rites, which require them to burn their dead. The Hindus and Sikhs burn their dead in the open with wood because they lack a crematorium facility in which to burn them. Khalsa said the Hindus and Sikhs of Kabul have been burning their dead at a site in District 8 (Qalacha) for the past 120 years. Since 2002, the Sikhs and Hindus must always have police protection to use the site, since local residents have frequently objected to burning of bodies at the site. The public objections do not appear to be based on religion per se, but rather on the issue of burning bodies near residential areas. Khalsa suspected the locals wanted the land for themselves, and were thus trying to force the Sikhs and Hindus to stop using the site. Local police have agreed to provide security for Sikh funerals, but often fail to do so. The situation has not improved despite repeated appeals to government officials, and despite permission from the

Afghan Environmental Protection Agency and the Mayor's office to perform their rites.

15. (U) The Kabul city government recently announced plans to seize 14 meters of land from the Sikhs to expand the road running past one of their two temples in Kabul. If the government seized the full 14 meters, the Sikhs would have to pull the temple down, and were afraid that as a poor community, they would not be able to rebuild. Though the Sikhs argued against the plan, the city was planning on going forward. The Sikhs want to rebuild a temple in Nangarhar that was destroyed during the war with the Soviets. Two alleged Hizb-e-Islami Gulbuddin (HIG) commanders have been blocking them. The Sikhs have approached the Nangarhar governor's office repeatedly since 2007. In March 2009, the governor issued an order allowing the Sikhs to rebuild their temple on the site. In April 2009, he told the Sikhs the site could not be built on due to "technical problems". He then promised to help resolve the problems, but nothing has been done.

16. (U) Minister for Parliamentary Affairs Anwar Jaktalak and 2nd Vice-President Mohammad Karim Khalili had both signed an order to create a special Hindu and Sikh township in Day Sak District of Kabul Province. The Sikhs and Hindus were refused authority to build by other parts of the government because they had a plan for a "new Kabul".

17. (U) Khalsa is the only Sikh or Hindu member of the Meshrano Jirga, with none in the Wolesi Jirga. Khalsa would like a constitutional amendment to set a quota of representation for the Sikhs and Hindus in Parliament. In

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Afghanistan, representation is based on the size of the community represented. A given community must have at least 10,000 members to be represented. At 6,000 people, the Hindu/Sikh community would not generally warrant a full representative seat, much less two.

Elections

18. (U) The Sikh and Hindu communities are eager to participate in the upcoming elections, and most have obtained voter registration cards. Sikhs and Hindus are not permitted to run for President under the constitution, which requires candidates to be Muslim. No Sikhs or Hindus have registered to run in the provincial council elections either, since they are too scattered to be very powerful as a voting block. Khalsa would like the Sikhs and Hindus to have the authority to vote for candidates for reserved Sikh and Hindus parliamentary seats from anywhere in the country. Khalsa said no candidates had approached the Sikhs and Hindus to seek their support for the upcoming elections.

EIKENBERRY